



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

**COMMUNICATION STYLES AMONG MALAYSIAN GRADUATE
STUDENTS**

WONG KO CHAI

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**COMMUNICATION STYLES AMONG MALAYSIAN GRADUATE
STUDENTS**

By

WONG KO CHAI

**Thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

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January 2002

Chairperson: Dr. Ezhar Tamam

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The communication styles of Malay, Chinese and Indian adults have not been thoroughly investigated and are, therefore, not well understood. The purpose of this study is to identify the communication styles of Malay, Chinese and Indian adults, and the relationship of self-construal and demography factors with communication style.

A sample of 256 graduate students at UPM participated in the survey using non-random quota sampling. A self-administered questionnaire was used as a research instrument, and a drop and pick-up method was used to collect the relevant data. The statistical techniques used to analyze the data were descriptive statistics, t-test, one-way ANOVA and MANCOVA.

The findings of this study suggest that a friendly style is predominant among the Malay adults, an attentive style is more predominant among the Chinese adults, and, friendly and animated styles are marked among the Indian adults. The results showed that self-construal is a good predictor of communication styles with independent self-

construal a better predictor of communication styles than interdependent self-construal. The results also showed that age, gender and religion are poor predictors of communication styles.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi sebahagian keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sains

GAYA KOMUNIKASI DI KALANGAN PELAJAR SARJANA DI MALAYSIA

Oleh

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Banyak kajian telah dijalankan tentang gaya komunikasi sesuatu kaum tetapi masih belum pernah dijalankan di kalangan orang dewasa Melayu, Cina dan India di negara ini. Oleh itu, gaya komunikasi bagi ketiga-tiga kaum ini masih belum dikenal pasti. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengenal pasti gaya komunikasi di kalangan orang dewasa Melayu, Cina and India, serta hubung kait antara faktor “self-construal” dan faktor demografi dari segi gaya komunikasi.

Seramai 256 orang responden yang mewakili pelajar dewasa di UPM terlibat dalam kajian ini dengan menggunakan prosedur pesampelan berkuota tidak-rawak. Soal selidik berstruktur telah digunakan sebagai instrumen kajian dan kaedah letak dan ambil digunakan untuk pengumpulan data. Teknik statistik untuk menganalisis data yang digunakan adalah statistik deskriptif, ujian t, ANOVA sehala dan MANCOVA.

Melalui kajian ini, didapati bahawa gaya mesra lebih banyak pada orang dewasa Melayu dan gaya atentif pula lebih banyak pada orang dewasa Cina, manakala orang dewasa India lebih banyak pada gaya beraksi. Selain itu, kajian ini juga mendapati

bahawa “self-construal” merupakan peramal gaya komunikasi yang baik. Hasil kajian juga menunjukkan bahawa “independent self-construal” merupakan peramal gaya komunikasi yang baik berbanding dengan “interdependent self-construal”. Keputusan juga mendapati bahawa faktor demografi seperti umur, jantina dan agama merupakan peramal gaya komunikasi yang kurang baik.

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I certify that an Examination Committee met on 25th January, 2002 to conduct the final examination of Wong Ko Chai on his Master of Science thesis entitled “Communication Styles Among Malaysian Graduate Students” in accordance with Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the candidate be awarded the relevant degree. Members of the Examination Committee are as follows:

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the thesis is based on my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted for any other degree at UPM or other institutions.



(WONG KO CHAI)

Date: 22/03/02

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

A study of communication styles of a group of people is actually a study on a part of the group's culture. Although there are numerous definitions of culture, culture is generally defined as a set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people (Matsumoto, 1996). Samovar and Porter (1995) and Gudykunst (1997) argued that communication and culture cannot be separated from one another. Indeed, the relationship between communication and culture has long been recognized. Since the early 50s, Hall (1959), the founder of the intercultural communication field, has categorically asserted that communication is culture and culture is communication.

Communication is learned behavior and behavior is governed by values and norms of a group or community. If behavior is governed by values and norms, then communication behavior should vary across cultures as different cultures ascribe to different values and norms. Accordingly, this premise implies that different cultures have different preferred practices of communication. Communication studies that examined the similarities and dissimilarities in communication behavior across cultures have adopted the etic approach (Gudykunst, 1997). This type of inquiry incorporates the cultural variability dimension in examining and explaining cross-cultural variation in communication behavior.

One of the dimensions of cultural variability that has been frequently considered in intercultural communication studies is the individualism-collectivism (I-C)

dimension (Gudykunst, 1997). The I-C dimension refers to the degree to which a culture encourages fosters, and facilitates the needs, wishes, desires and values (Matsumoto, 1996). In individualistic cultures, the personal needs, values and goals take precedence over the needs, values, and goals of others. In collectivistic cultures, on the contrary, the individual needs, values, and goals are sacrificed in order to satisfy others. Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim and Heyman (1996) argued that cultural I-C influences the major cultural values that individuals learn and the ways individual members of cultures acquire conceptions of themselves. Figure 1 below summarizes the ideas on the linkages between I-C and communication behavior as purported by Gudykunst and his colleagues (1996).

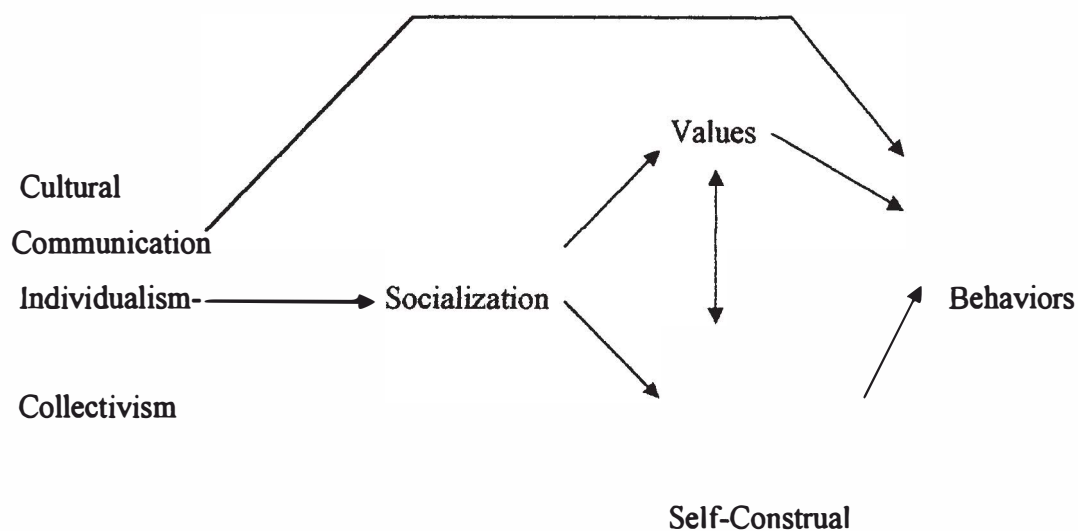


Figure 1: The influence of Cultural Individualism-Collectivism on Communication Behavior
Source: Gudykunst et al. (1996)

It is apparent in Figure 1 that cultural I-C has two ways to influence a person's communication behaviors, either directly or indirectly. Cultural I-C influences communication behaviors directly because it affects the norms and rules that guide behavior in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures. Indirectly, cultural I-C has an effect on communication behavior through individual-level factors such as the way individuals conceive themselves and the values that individuals hold. An individual's values and self-construal, in turn, have a direct influence on his or her communication behaviors.

The role of individual factors, particularly as self-construal, to explain variation in communication behavior has been the interest of recent intercultural communication studies. Gudykunst et al. (1996) for instance, examined how individual-level factors mediated the influence of cultural I-C on communication styles. Meanwhile, Oetzel (1998) examined the effects of self-construal and ethnicity on self-reported conflict styles. Singelis and Sharkey (1995) studied the relationship between self-construal and embarrass ability. Cross (1995) examined the influence of self-construal on coping and stress in cross-cultural adaptation. All the research mentioned suggest that self-construal is a good predictor of communication behaviors.

Self-construal functions as a mediator that influences of I-C. This affects individuals' communication behavior through the way individuals conceive of themselves. The ways individuals conceive themselves vary across cultures. Markus and Kitayama's (1991) conceptualization of self-construal consisted of two dimensions - independent self-construal and interdependent self-construal. Independent self-construal, as construed by Markus and Kitayama (1991), involves the view that an

individual's self is a unique, and independent entity. People who portray an independent self-construal are those who try to be different from others, strive for their own goals, express themselves, and are direct. On the other hand, interdependent self-construal is related to specific others and it guides behavior in specific social situations. People who portray an interdependent self-construal are those who try to fit in with the same group, to behave in traditional ways, to promote the group's goals, to occupy one's proper place, to be indirect and to read other people's minds. Many studies suggest that independent self-construal is more predominant in Western society and interdependent self-construal is more predominant in Eastern society (Gudykunst, 1997).

There has been empirical evidence to support the claim that communication style is related to self-construal. At the society level, communication style has been described as high-context and low-context communication. Gudykunst et al. (1996) has found that independent self-construal mediate cultural I-C through the use of low-context communications and interdependent self-construal mediate cultural I-C through the use of high-context communications.

While there have been studies that examine the influence of self-construal on communication style at group level, studies that examine the influence of self-construal on communication style at individual level is lacking. Researchers have used Norton's typology of communication style widely to describe variation in communication behavior at the individual level. Norton (1978) defined communication styles as "the way one verbally and paraverbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood"(p. 99). In other words, Norton (1983) argued

that communication style is the way one communicates that gives form to literal meaning.

Everyone has his or her own style of communicating. Littlejohn (1999) echoed Norton's view that communication styles are not totally individual because cultures do affect how people behave and the way they perceive others. Cultural values and social interactions contribute to different communication patterns. Culture has a direct or indirect effect on communication style. Individuals not only have one communication style but also have many different styles to communicate with other. Norton (1983), like others, pointed out that there are many styles that individuals can use to communicate across cultures and within cultures. Although an individual may have several communication styles, generally one is more dominant.

In examining the influence of self-construal on communication style, it is important to consider the ethnicity factor. There have been many studies that observed ethnic differences in communication behavior. Miller (1978) for example, found that white Americans tend to be more dominant; meanwhile black Americans tend to be more dramatic. In another study, it has been found that the Japanese perceived themselves as being more open than Filipinos (Ishii et al., 1981). On the same note, Wood (1997) argued that different ethnic groups have different and distinct communication patterns. Wood also suggests that the culture in which individuals are raised influence the way they think, behave, and communicate. For instance, African Americans generally engage in more dramatic and elaborate verbal play than European Americans.

In addition to ethnicity, some researchers have also observed age, gender and religious differences in communication style (e.g. Hansford and Hattie, 1987; Lewis and Slade, 1994). Hansford's and Hattie's (1987) findings reported that when people grow older, they get less and less relaxed and animated. Bodary and Miller (2000) found that gender differences are reflected in communication style preferences.

All in all, the theoretical argument offered here is that at the individual level, ethnicity, along with age, gender and religion, are important variables in examining the influence of self-construal on communication style.

Statement of Research Problem

Larry and Richard (1991) mentioned that a culture may give its members specialized patterns of communication and patterns that are often dissimilar to those of people from other cultures. Each culture has different ways of coding rules and cultural norms, which play a major role in shaping various patterns of interaction. Hofstede (1991), along the same line, point out that different ethnic identities may imply differences in cultural values. The groups may be culturally close but differences still exist among them.

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country with three major ethnic groups. The three main ethnic groups are Malay, Chinese and Indian. The Malaysian population consists of Malays (47%), Chinese (25%), Indigenous groups (11%), Indian (7%), non-Malaysian citizens (7%), others (3%) (Anon^a, 1999). These three main ethnic groups have their own distinct ethnic identities and ascribe to different values while they

socialize. Although the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia may not be so different culturally, there are still some differences found in their cultural values. Lim (1998) argues that although Malays and Malaysian Chinese do share some similarities in cultural, there is enough evidence to illustrate that there exist fundamental differences in cultural attributes between them. In light of the differences in cultural values among these three major ethnic groups, each of them may have their own preferred style of communication.

Therefore, each ethnic group may own different communication styles. The communication styles of individuals are related to the cultural Individualism-Collectivism (I-C). According to Triandis (1989) and Hofstede (1991), Malaysia is a collectivistic culture society. As a collectivistic country, therefore, it is expected that the three major ethnic groups be more dominant on interdependent self-construal. Although Malaysia is a collectivistic society, the individualistic element has crept in after undergoing massive modernization since the early 1980s in the areas of economics, politics and education. According to the Information Malaysia Yearbook, the 1980s have brought new political directions and economic challenges to Malaysia under the new administration of Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad since 1981 (Anon^b, 1997).

The cultural I-C has direct influence on individuals' communication style through individual level self-construal. Gudykunst et al. (1996) argued that members of individualistic cultures are more dominant on the independent self-construal, while on the other hand; members of collectivistic cultures are more dominant on the

interdependent self-construal. As the self-construal of a person is found to be related to communication styles, it is important to take into account the role of the self-construal variable in a study of communication styles. Both knowledge on self-construals and communication styles are important as it can be used as a conceptual in understanding the dynamics of inter-ethnic communication.

As there is a lack of information on communication styles of Malays, Chinese and Indians, it is salient to study the communication styles that are predominant among the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Additionally, since self-construal is a cultural factor that influences communication behavior, it is also pertinent to examine the self-construal orientation on the three ethnic groups, as there is a lack of information on it. Besides self-construal, age, gender and religion also are cultural factors. Therefore, it is important to consider these factors in examining the influence of self-construal on communication style.

Hence, in line with the lack of empirical evidence on the predominant communication styles and self-construal of the three major ethnic groups in Malaysia, the following research questions are posed.

1. What are the predominant communication styles of Malay, Chinese, and Indian adults?
2. How do the Malays, Chinese and Indians see themselves in terms of self-construal?

3. What are the relationships between age, gender, and religion on the one hand, and self-construal with communication style on the other?

Objective of the Study

The main objective of this study is to identify the nature of communication styles of Malays, Chinese and Indians, and the factors correlated to it.

The specific purposes of this study are:

1. to identify predominant communication styles among Malay, Chinese, and Indian adults.
2. to identify the type of self-construal among Malays, Chinese and Indians.
3. to identify the relationship of related demographic factors and self-construal with communication styles.

Significance of the Study

Besides differences in language, communication style has been identified as one of the factors that contribute to miscommunication or misunderstanding in interethnic communication. When two people from different cultures communicate, obviously they will face some difficulties in their interaction. The difficulties can be attributed to differences in communication style. The findings of this study may provide useful information about the communication styles among the three ethnic groups. With this

information, it is hoped that individuals will have a better understanding about their communication styles and the communication styles of others. Basically, it helps one not to interpret others wrongly. It also may increase the awareness of a person when socializing with someone from a different culture.

The findings of the present study can contribute to local literature. It can provide useful information for researchers on how to carry out further or related studies. It also contributes to some theoretical areas. The way one communicates may affect the perceptual processes of the individual. For instance, in an information theory orientation, communication style contributes to both noise and redundancy during an interaction. In interpersonal communication theory, communicator style is part of the effect determinant by definition (Norton, 1983). Communication style is related to variations of attractiveness and effectiveness. The way a person communicates affects whether the individual is perceived as attractive and certain communication styles are likely to be perceived as more effective in particular interactions.

On a practical level, this study provides a guide and methodology for future researchers to conduct further study on it. For example, it provides useful guidelines for those researchers who want to further the study on other local ethnic groups or to investigate how communication style influences effectiveness and interpersonal attraction across ethnic groups.

Limitations of the Study

This research is a case study of adults' (graduate students either doing their master or Ph.D. program) communication styles in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). The findings of this study may only be used to generalize the population of graduate students in UPM. The samples of this study are not adequate to represent the larger adult population. Thus, generalizations of the research findings take precaution to generalize the findings to larger population.